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ARE FOODS TRUTHFULLY LABELED?

A radio talk by Mr. C. W. Crawford, Food, Drug and Insecticide Administration, delivered through WRC and 31 other stations associated with the National Broadcasting Company, at 2:00 p.m., E. S. T., Thursday, Aug. 29, 1929.

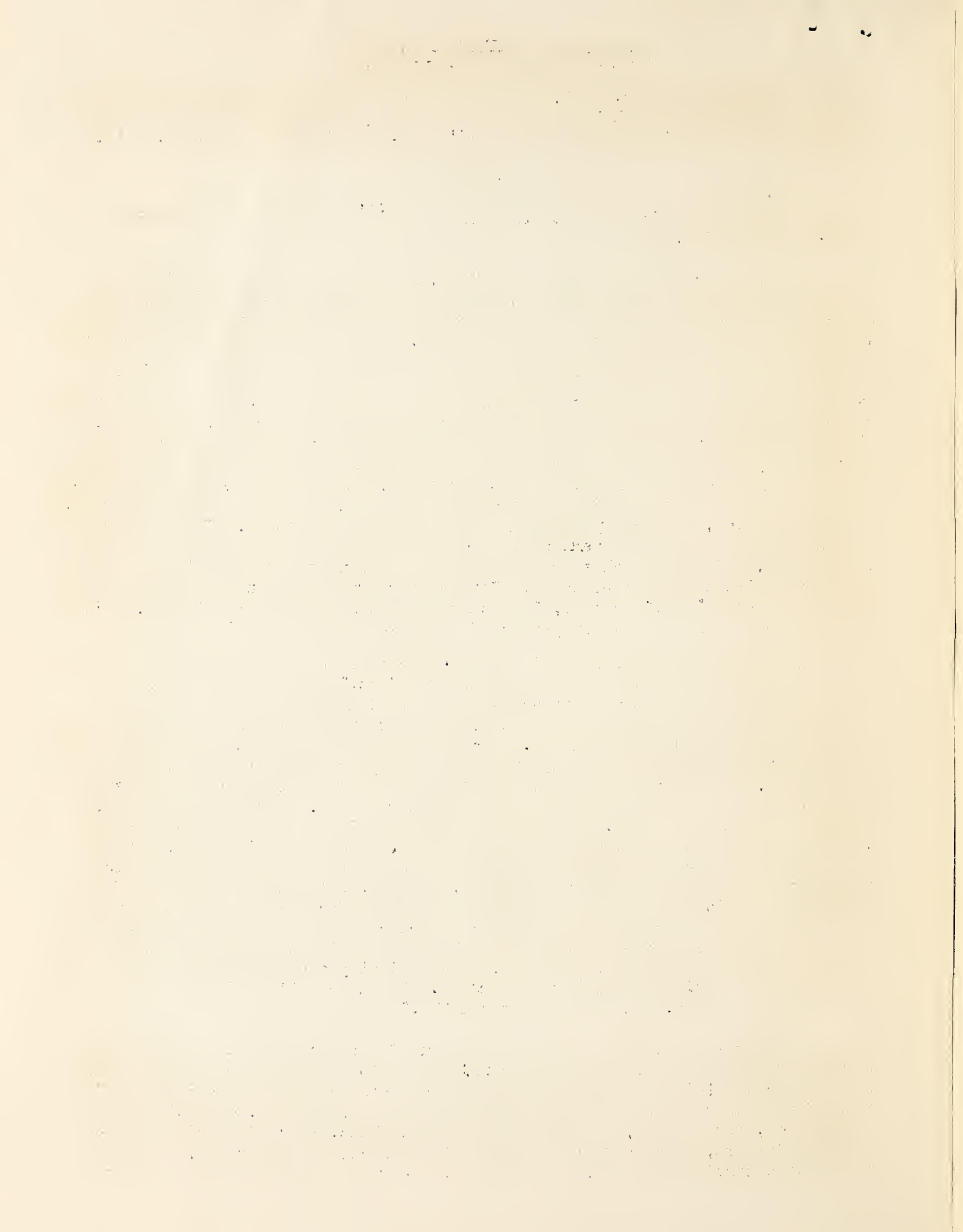
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The question "Are foods truthfully labeled?" can not be answered by either "Yes" or "No."

In the executive offices of the Food, Drug and Insecticide Administration in Washington there recently appeared a food manufacturer against whom proceedings under the Federal food and drugs act had been started. His product was a purple powder sold in small cartons. The label assured the housewife that by the easy and inexpensive process of adding the contents to two cups of sugar and a pint of water, boiling for a few minutes and cooling, she would have four glasses of the finest grape jelly. The label went on to say that this grape jelly would be just like the jelly she would get by the hot, laborious, time-consuming process of preparing it from grapes out of her own garden. Emphasis was placed on the availability of this product for making fresh grape jelly at any time of the year, in season and out. Analysis by Government chemists had shown that the product consisted of artificial flavor resembling grape, artificial color, acid and pectin. No grape juice was present. While these constituents are entirely harmless, none of them had ever been associated with grapes, and the so-called grape jelly the housewife made in this way was merely an imitation of grape jelly. The manufacturer admitted his labeling was exaggerated, "But," he said, "I was merely taking salesman's license. I'd have been a boob not to put my product forward in the best possible light."

I have told this story to illustrate the fact that the question "Are foods truthfully labeled?" can not be answered "Yes," for so long as men with such standards of ethics are attracted to the food manufacturing field, misbranded foods will appear on the market. By "misbranded" foods I mean foods bearing false or misleading labels. The food and drugs act has no jurisdiction over advertising such as that appearing in newspapers and periodicals, and on bill-boards. But untruthfully labeled foods do not often stay on the market for long, nor do they frequently gain wide distribution. The reason for this happy condition is twofold. First, the great majority of food manufacturers make no attempt to misrepresent their products. They recognize that, even if there were no law to prevent misbranding, an enduring business enterprise can not be built on dishonest merchandise. Secondly, the small proportion of dishonest individuals who have invaded the food manufacturing field find that the enforcement of the food and drugs act makes cheating through the medium of false label statements unprofitable. The net result is that today the sale of American foods is on a higher, more ethical plane than that of any other great commodity group, here or abroad. So the question, "Are foods truthfully labeled?", can not be answered "No."

Perhaps some idea of how truthfully our foods are labeled may be conveyed by stating that during the year 1927 only 810 cases were brought against foods under the Federal food and drugs act for both adulteration and misbranding. The total value of manufactured foods for the same year, excluding raw commodities, like grains, fresh fruits and vegetables, reached nearly 14 billions of dollars, more than half the valuation of all our railroads. With the close supervision that is maintained over our food supply, it is obvious



that misbranding is not general, or many more than 810 prosecutions would have been brought.

There is altogether too widespread an impression that the food and drugs act deals merely with the purity and wholesomeness of foods, and prevents only such abuses as the sale of rotten food or food containing added poisonous substances in amounts which may be harmful to health. While the law emphatically forbids traffic in filthy or decomposed foods, or foods containing added poisonous ingredients which may render them harmful to health, it also, with equal emphasis, bans the sale of foods under labels which are false, misleading or deceptive in any particular whatever. The United States Supreme Court has said: "The law enjoins truth." So there is little room for so-called "salesman's license," or the play of the imagination beyond the realm of facts in the labeling of foods. In buying a package of food today, you are very likely to get just what the label says it is.

But while the law permits no false or deceptive labeling, it does not require a detailed descriptive label except where such a label is necessary to prevent deception. Let me cite canned peas as an example. So long as peas are clean, wholesome, and canned while green, that is, before they have dried in the pods, they may be labeled simply with the word "peas." But we all know the vast difference in quality between the tiny, tender, succulent peas and the large starchy peas canned just before they begin to dry on the vine. Both products are canned peas and while no false representation as to quality or grade can be made, both may be labeled with the name "peas" without qualification. There is now no authority in the law to compel the canner to place a completely descriptive label on the low-grade product, identifying it as such. The housewife has no sure way of telling the difference between the high-grade and the low-grade peas, unless she happens to be familiar with the brand names appearing upon the labels, and these are so many as to be confusing.

A bill is now pending in Congress to amend the food and drugs act to require the labeling of low-grade canned foods to show their substandard quality. The organized canning industry is strongly backing this bill. This illustrates vividly the changed attitude of food manufacturing industries toward the food and drugs act. Nearly 23 years ago, when the law first became effective, there was a great deal of apprehension among food manufacturers that its enforcement would prove to be a burden on legitimate and honest business. In the years that followed, these manufacturers began to appreciate that the law required only a square deal between producer and consumer, and that it places no restriction whatever on honest, straight-forward business. They also began to realize that the principle of fair dealing with the consumer and the winning of his or her confidence is the only sure basis of an enduring business. So today we have the canners asking Congress to strengthen the same law which some twenty years ago they feared would prove a serious handicap to their progress.

The protection afforded by the food and drugs act against unwholesome and deceptively labeled foods costs each man, woman and child in the United States something less than one cent a year, but the full value of this investment is not obtained unless those responsible for the expenditure of the food item in the family budget read the labels carefully and intelligently. A housewife recently expressed indignation at the poor quality of a can of lima





beans she bought from a local grocer." Yet examination of the empty can showed that the label plainly said "Soaked Dry Lima Beans." If the lady had observed the label when she made her purchase, she would have known these beans were not canned in the fresh, succulent state, but were dried beans, requiring soaking before canning.

The law requires the labels of all packaged foods to bear a plain and conspicuous statement of the quantity of the contents in terms of weight, measure or numerical count. From two cartons of cake flour, for example, of the same quality and price, housewives have been known to select the one containing the smaller amount of flour. If they had observed the net weight declarations, they could easily have chosen the carton containing the larger amount of flour, and thus received more for their money. To protect themselves, buyers of food should carefully read the labels. The law can only insure truthful labels; it is up to buyers to take full advantage of the information they convey.

